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Fantasy and Reality at Crossroads: Exploring Mythical and Mortal Worlds in Select Novels of Rick Riordan

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Synopsis

American children's fantasy writer Rick Riordan, inspired by his son Haley who is diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and dyslexia, as well as his heterogeneous students, writes to promote inclusivity of children with neurodiversity, varied ethnicities, races, emotional, intellectual, physical, cultural and social differences, financial and familial backgrounds, and discourages marginalisation or pathology. Riordan's novels adeptly intertwine myth and reality, constructing a unique narrative landscape that immerses readers in a fantastical world while resonating with their everyday experiences. He embeds the legendary Greek mythological world, its characters, and creatures within contemporary contexts using magical realism, drawing inspiration from historical events, cultural practices, and classical Greek myths. Despite their mythological heritage, the characters remain profoundly human, grappling with real emotions and struggles as the narratives often delve into real-world issues such as identity, power dynamics, and social justice. The blend of fantasy and reality amplifies the depth of his narratives, making his novels a compelling exploration of the human condition and a reflection of the complexities of modern life.

The study explores the confluence of the fantastical Greek mythical world alongside the ordinary modern day America as fantasy and reality coincides in Riordan's Greek mythological retelling series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2005-2023) which allude to the gods, heroes, mythological creatures, magical relics, and locales in classical Greek mythology with a mesmerising blend of magic, action, adventure, and mystery, lending the novels the magnificence of the ancient myths. The select novels of the series, *The Lightning Thief* (2005), *The Sea of Monsters* (2006), *The Titan's Curse* (2007), *The Battle of the Labyrinth* (2008), and *The Last*

Olympian (2009), as a whole, form one large plot/narrative which revolves around the twelve-year-old protagonist Percy Jackson, who like Riordan's son Haley, has dyslexia and ADHD, initially lives an ordinary life in Manhattan, unaware of his identity, and later discovers that he is a demigod, born to his mortal mother Sally Jackson and the Greek God Poseidon. His demigod identity entails that he belongs to two worlds – the mortal world and the Greek mythological world which is camouflaged to blend with the mortal world.

The narrative is driven by The Great Prophecy made seventy five years prior to Percy's birth. The prophecy says that a mortal child will be born to the elder gods, Zeus, Poseidon or Hades with the power to either topple or preserve them due to which the gods vow not to sire anymore mortal children, forming the crux of the plot of the narrative, based on which each novel is driven by a prophecy and a corresponding quest. Percy's mythical adventures begin with his mission to restore the Lord of the Sky Zeus's master bolt, which adds momentum to fulfilling his ultimate goal to defeat the archvillain Kronos, a power-hungry Titan, to restore peace to Olympus, the heavenly abode of the Olympians. Eventually, Percy is taken to Camp Half-Blood, the safe haven for demigods, modelled after a summer camp, where they are trained in swordfight, archery, and wrestling to hone their natural abilities that they gain from their godly parents. Like Percy, the demigods have ADHD which acts as a battlefield reflex, serving as an advantage while they fight evil forces, withstand continual monster attacks, and embark on dangerous quests, and have dyslexia that enables them to read ancient Greek. The inclusion of characters with the disabilities is a metaphorical statement that they are extraordinary; it distinguishes Percy, in particular, from the conventional ideal of the "perfect" hero, making him more relatable as someone with flaws yet succeeds.

The characters and setting in the select novels are presented realistically, but the fictitious atmosphere of the narrative serves as a purgatory/limbo between "fantasy" and "reality" where fantasy in the books attain meaning when it relates to the readers' reality, which is catalysed using Riordan's narration and worldbuilding. Riordan uses magical realism to depict supernatural or unreal things as a natural part of the setting, establishing a new reality for the mythological world with self-referential laws that challenge the notions of time and space within the parameters of the fictional reality of the narrative.

Research gap

The review of literature indicates that the themes of race, ethnicity, neurodiversity, ecology, intertextuality, mythological recreation, and traces of postmodernism have been explored, but the narrative has not been analysed as an intersection of literature, psychology, and sociology, focusing on fantasy, reality, plot structure, and narrative techniques using the concepts of postmodernism, which are as dynamic as the genre of study.

The concepts of postmodernism like Julia Kristeva's intertextuality; the plot structural models – Gustav Freytag's 'Freytag pyramid', Northrop Frye's criticism of myth, John Gardner's 'Fichtean Curve', Tzvetan Todorov's narrative theory of equilibrium, Vladimir Propp's narrative structure, Joseph Campbell's 'monomyth' or the hero's journey, John Clute's structure of fantasy, and Christopher Vogler's 'Mythic Structure'; the character archetypes identified by Propp, Vogler, and the actantial concept of A. J. Greimas; William H. Gass's metafiction; Jean Francois Lyotard's incredulity towards metanarratives; and Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction are used to collate the shift in the structure of classical

Greek myths from conventionality to contemporaneity and explore the relationship between fiction and reality to create a modern and playful narrative experience.

Intertextuality has been used to examine the mythical elements in the select novels that utilises the Greek mythological tales as a storytelling tool. The plot structures and character archetypes are used to illustrate the structure of myths (the beginning, middle, and end of the tales), allowing a comparison that traces Riordan's manipulation of the plot structure and character functions which instantiate the emergence of a non-rigid framework that impact readers in social, cultural, and psychological spheres, accommodate socially relevant themes, and illustrate the atmosphere of fantasy and the illusion of reality.

The select novels are discussed in the context of the hybridity of characters as it features anthropomorphic and zoomorphic hybrid characters that embody the dichotomies of man-god and man-beast like demigods, centaurs, and gorgons. The novels embrace an informal style of narration, mimicking the everyday conversation style using colloquial language; the informal style is a form of metafiction, as it draws attention to its status as a fictional work. The casual style of narration is aesthetically woven into the narrative to maintain contemporaneity and simplicity, a contrast to the grandnarratives of the classical Greek myths.

The select novels function as mininarratives that subvert the pre-existing classical form, structure, tropes, and techniques of the metanarratives, which according to Lyotard are characterised by "totalising" formulaic narrative patterns, fixed prototypes, rigid genre boundaries, restricted space for innovation, self-legitimacy, and its authoritarian nature, inviting mistrust, which he identifies as incredulity towards metanarratives (xxiv). The concept is used to exemplify multiple realistic perspectives in the select works to highlight that the select novels do not

change the foundation of ancient myths, but further enrich them by making them relevant and accessible to contemporary readers. Historiographic metafiction describes a type of fiction that is both self-aware (metafictional) and deeply rooted in historical context (historical). It challenges the traditional distinction between history and fiction by presenting history as a narrative constructed through subjective interpretation rather than an objective recounting of facts. The concept is used in the study to present different viewpoints of the original myths, challenging the idea of the myths as fixed and reinterpreting them as part of history in the fictional reality of the narrative through the incorporation of various realistic perspectives that treats them as multifaceted and interpretative.

Thesis Statement

The dual world construction and juxtaposition of fantasy and reality in Rick Riordan's select novels are explored to bridge the gap between the two through an examination of the structural elements employed in ancient Greek mythological tales which are transcribed to contemporary reality in a way that brings a positive cultural, psychological, and sociological impact on readers.

Objectives

Objectives establish a link between fantasy/fictional reality of the select novels with the readers' reality to:

i. Investigate the role of literature in bridging the gap between fantasy and reality.
ii. Evaluate the plot structural changes and narrative strategies that redefine traditional storytelling methods in the select novels.
iii. Attempt to relieve fantasy literature of its secondary status as it contributes to the continuum of meaning in literature.

iv. Analyse the positive impacts of the fictional reality in the select novels on the social reality of readers in a less confrontational manner.

v. Examine the construction and representation of myths in contemporary children's fantasy literature in accordance with the society's current intellectual, social, and cultural trends.

The first chapter "**Introduction**" explores imagination as the beginning of creation which paves the way for storytelling as it is the foundation of written literature. It presents a backdrop of the evolution of fantasy fiction from the ancient to its present form. The relevance of the select works is discussed by introducing a gist of the select novels, juxtaposing fantasy and reality in them, and examining the interlaced elements. The chapter explains the concepts of the theoretical framework which are used to analyse the select novels, reviews significant literature associated with the topic, locates a research gap, elaborates on the significance of the title, illustrates the objectives of the study, and gives an outline of the core chapters.

The second chapter titled "**Breaking the Mould: Examining Structural Evolution**" exposes the strategies used by Rick Riordan in the construction of a culturally relevant postmodern narrative. The effectiveness of narratives lies in their ability to resonate with readers, which is achieved through its relatability, aesthetic qualities, and structural coherence. The plot structure of the select works has been compared with eight conventional plot structural models and four character archetypes using the concepts of intertextuality and incredulity towards metanarratives.

The plot structure of the narrative begins with Freytag's 'exposition/the beginning', Frye's 'birth', Gardner's 'rising action', Todorov's 'equilibrium', Propp's 'absentation', Campbell's 'the call to adventure', Clute's 'bondage', and Vogler's

'ordinary world' which indicates the phase that Percy remains oblivious to his true identity and lives an ordinary life in the mortal world in the first novel *The Lightning Thief*. He eventually finds his way into the mythological realm and each volume features the journeys of several other characters that acknowledge their previous transgressions and come to terms with the past which aid in their transformation as true heroes. The characters are held together by the hope for a better future that acts as the driving force to try and succeed in further fights for survival in the subsequent novels, *The Sea of Monsters*, *The Titan's Curse*, and *The Battle of the Labyrinth*, until the final stand – the climactic battle between the hero and the villain, referred to as 'struggle' (by Propp)/'ordeal' (by Vogler). The hero emerges victorious, leading to 'return to equilibrium' (by Todorov)/'land' (by Clute)/ 'healing' (by Clute) where characters return to a state of balance and focus on healing after the events that transpire, achieving the 'freedom to live' (by Campbell) without the threat of the archvillain at the end of the fifth novel, *The Last Olympian*. However, the hero's journey is non-conclusive, which is a subversion of the models as it does not provide any gratification, for the Oracle makes a prophecy, indicating another impending conflict, dealt in the next series.

Drawing upon universal narrative patterns and archetypes, the study elucidates that the fantastical adventures of the characters in the select novels are underpinned by fundamental human themes like courage, identity, friendship, and quest for self-discovery that are relatable to readers from varied personal experiences and cultural backgrounds, enabling them to see reflections of their own lives and struggles within the mythical narrative, fostering a deeper engagement with the text. The insights from various conventional plot structural models that represent diverse cultural and disciplinary perspectives on the narrative construction aims to provide a nuanced

interpretation of the plot structure and character development, enriching the understanding of the literary artistry – integration and reinterpretation of classical mythological motifs within a modern framework.

The evolution in the structure of narratives extends to the functions of characters which adhere to as well as diverge from the roles of the archetypal characters referred to with different names perform the same function in the novels. For instance Propp and Greimas's 'helper' and Vogler's 'ally' are embodied by the characters, Annabeth and Grover. Similarly, 'hero' by Propp and Vogler and 'subject' are represented by Percy. Greimas as well as Propp's 'villain', Vogler's 'shadow', and Greimas's 'opponent' are personified through the character Kronos. However, the analysis indicates that unlike the conventional models, there are multiple heroic and villainous characters in the narrative which is a subversion of the models. In certain instances in the select novels, the roles of Vogler's 'sender' and Greimas's 'mentor' coincide for the character Chiron. Additionally, there are multiple 'object(s)' of quest in the narrative, which is a subversion of Greimas's actant.

Archetypes identified by the theorists in the novels include Propp's 'donor or provider' (Ares) and 'princess' (Annabeth), Vogler's 'threshold guardian' (Charon), 'trickster' (Grover), 'herald' (Dodds), and 'shapeshifter' (Luke), as well as Greimas's 'receiver' (Camp Half-Blood). Notably, some of Propp's archetypes, 'false hero,' 'father,' and 'dispatcher' do not appear in the novels.

Conventional character archetypes like gods, mythical creatures, and heroes are modernised to fit into readers' reality by attributing descriptions that suit those of modern Americans. The depiction of the characters as loving, playful, mature, loyal, flirtatious, childish, possessive, immature, hostile, unconcerned, short tempered, engagement in incestuous and extramarital affairs, irreverent, annoyed, jealous,

sarcastic, arrogant, narcissistic, unempathetic, resentful, self-centred, lazy, and irresponsible at different times show that they are the symbols of humanity as they are not simply good and evil but have blurred identities with grey (neutral) shades which is a subversion of the traditional dichotomies of black or white and good or evil. Contemporary fantasies are rooted in archetypal structure, but they are flexible and adhere to set patterns, which enables to meet the realistic expectations of contemporary readers. The retelling is not a parody, but an enriching tale that highlights a transformative journey of children, through their quest for identity and evolution into mature young people (bildungsroman) who understand the importance of team effort and friendship, proving that children are equipped to handle intense situations, which will help them to be empowered when they read similar narratives.

The third chapter titled, "**Unravelling the Magic: Exploration of Narrative Techniques**" melds fantasy and reality through an inquiry into the narrative style of the select novels and its subversive departure from a formulaic structure of storytelling. The narrative techniques of language, focalisation, chronology, and the opening and ending which are characteristics of metafiction, along with worldbuilding have been analysed. The narrative language, characterised by an informal, distinctly American conversational style, captures the interest of children as it is realistic, relatable, and easy to understand. Linguistic hybridisation of modern and ancient language is depicted through the ancient character Zoe Nightshade, who struggles to adapt with the evolution of the English language, and uses words like "thy", "thee", "thou" instead of "your" and "you", while other characters find it challenging to accommodate her ancient way of speaking. Linguistic hybridisation in the select novels also includes playfulness in language depicted through the modern expressions and phrases, "blah blah", "oh man", "very very dead"; curse words and exclamatory

remarks in Greek like "*Vlacas"* which means stupid, *"Di immortales"* meaning "oh my gods!"; and "go to Tartarus!" and "what in Hades!" instead of "go to hell!" and "what in the hell!". Long hyphenated words like "really-big-lizard-that-blows-stuff-up", verbal puns like parody, satire, sarcasm, irony, humour (nicknames, funny situations), and dark humour are also used. The choice of words to describe characters gods, monsters, antagonists, and other characters highlight Americanisation and modernisation. Metafiction also includes fragmentation of syntax used in narration like vocal pauses such as "um" and "uh" and the use of extremely short sentences, referred to as minimalism. The narration alternates between willing suspension of disbelief which urges the readers to believe the artificiality of the text as seen in the opening lines of the narrative – "Look I didn't want to be a half-blood. If you're reading this because you think you might be one, my advice is: close this book right now. Believe whatever lie your mom or dad told you about your birth, and try to lead a normal life" – and self reflexivity that aims to distance the readers from the text's artificiality like Percy referring to monsters using mobile phones as "modern and creepy" (*The Lightning Thief* 1; *The Titan's Curse* 19).

Focalisation is another method used to highlight the interplay between ancient myths and contemporary reality by bringing out the motivations, thoughts, and feelings of the characters to present different points of view. Internal focalisation, which is akin to first person narration, delves into the insight, thoughts, and feelings of characters through the focal character, Percy. External focalisation occurs when the reader is solely allowed to access the actions and behaviours of characters who know more than the narrators like Chiron who explains the birth of the gods to Percy. The chronology of the narrative is observed to be linear, which is easy to follow. The

opening and ending deviate from the conventional narratives that typically commence with “once upon a time” or “happily ever after”.

The worldbuilding in the narrative acquires a distinctive texture by merging the primary world of mortals with the secondary mythological realm. The overarching context of the authors’/readers’ world incorporates the fictional/narrative world which has an intersection of the mythical and mortal realms including Camp Half-Blood, Mt. Olympus, and the Underworld. The spatiotemporal condition of the real world is challenged in the narrative using the functioning of labyrinth, the mythical maze, with entrances in diverse locations in the United States. The Labyrinth features a relaxation of strict timelines as time within the maze moves at a fast pace, compared to the outside world. The select novels features the Lotus Casino in Vegas, which entraps and indulges its customers by mesmerising them in the hyperreal world of technology where time moves slower than the outside world. The Casino serves as a metaphor for the time people lose when immersed in technological addiction where simulations of reality replace the real. To lend a realistic element to the locations in the narrative, Riordan includes maps in the books.

The realistic narrative consists of the reimagination of path breaking historical figures as demigods like Amelia Earhart, Harriet Tubman, Houdini, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, William H. Seaward alter the readers’ perception of history, adding an astounding sense of reality to the novels. The author invents fictional accounts for the motivation behind World War II and the creation of the Underground Railroad, and real geographical places in America, with which the mythological world coexists in harmony, facilitating the idea using the mechanisms of the mystical shroud ‘Mist’ which veils the mythical world from the mortals.

The narrative style reflects contemporary trends and aesthetic sensations like popular games, fast food chains, pop music, marketing campaigns, indulgence in merchandise from popular shows, and psychedelic art, grounding the narrative in the real world. Even before it becomes a pop culture phenomenon, the text exhibits metaconsciousness as it comments on its own popularity. The narrative subverts the authoritative voice of myths and decentres dominating perspectives through reinterpretation by preserving the ancient stories, updating the canonical characters and the setting. Structures, characters, and culture in the select novels are a shift from the Greek myths to an Americanised context that reflects the evolving nature of storytelling and cultural identity.

The fourth chapter titled, "**Crossing the Limbo: Bridging Fantasy, Reality, and Readers of All Ages**" begins with the contention of the notion that fantasy narratives are "imaginative" and "escapist", making it suitable only for children and not for adults. The notion is defended by George MacDonald who states in his essay "The Fantastic Imagination" that he was not writing ". . . for children but for the childlike, whether five, or fifty, or seventy-five", establishing that fantasy is for everyone (25). Adults read fantasy for various reasons, including entertainment, nostalgia, and work. The select novels exemplify that fantasy narratives are not purely "imaginative" or "escapist" as they do not present an idealised world; instead, they incorporate realistic themes of social justice, diversity, inclusivity, ecology, dark themes such as death and loss of loved ones, aspects of psychology, emotions, and contemporary concerns of growing up, which can help children understand the world better and provide adults with insights into the experiences and perspectives of children.

Children's fantasy literature is entertaining and gives readers the pleasure of reading; didactic as it can enhance literary skills, critical thinking, and impart values; and tool for social connection and networking by building communities for meaningful interactions. Fantasy can help children to understand the world better and create a sense of self, moulding them into better individuals with the help of adults. Parents can take children to libraries, help them to select books, read them aloud as bed-time stories, encourage reading on their own, and having meaningful discussions about the characters and storyline. Educators can nurture the reading interest and identify suitable books to be included in curricula through a critical literacy framework by decoding texts, helping students understand author-reader and author-text relationships, explore themes, and uncover hidden meanings which have a scope in cultural pedagogy. Teachers can also incorporate kinaesthetic activities like games, hold group discussions, role playing, and give creative assignments like writing an extension of storylines and creating alternate endings to the existing narrative. Technology can be used for educational purposes and the impact of digital and interactive formats of books like eBooks and audio books which extend beyond traditional medium of physical books can be explored in classrooms. Librarians can help identify suitable books, curate them, conduct competitions and activities, and invite authors to their institutions, giving students a chance to interact with them. Budding authors can foster a love for reading and support educational initiatives by engaging with readers through social media, developing educational materials, and creating interactive content online. They can also promote digital formats, curate book lists, support literacy programs, and organise contests to inspire and connect with their audience.

The fifth chapter, "**Conclusion**" asserts that the select works exist as a narrative self-portrait and a reviser of grand narrative traditions. The study demonstrates a subversion of the conventional structural models and narration by providing authentic voices that are reflective of true life. It highlights the transformative power of children's fantasy literature and the alternative ways of thinking through aesthetic and social advocacy to live with an awareness of their culture.

Attempting to relieve fantasy literature of its secondary status involves recognising its substantial contribution to the continuum of meaning in literature. Fantasy literature, including the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series, should not be relegated to a secondary status because it offers profound insights into the human condition and societal issues, just as much as other literary genres. Despite fantasy's recent surge in popularity, it has long been a significant part of literary history, with roots in ancient myths, legends, and folklore.

The capacity of fantasy literature to blend the extraordinary with the ordinary allows for an exploration of the human experience in innovative ways, contributing to a richer, more diverse literary landscape. The genre transcends mere escapism by addressing universal themes and existential questions. It provides a unique platform for exploring complex ideas in a manner that is both accessible and engaging. By employing archetypal narratives and imaginative settings, fantasy enables readers to confront and reflect upon their realities through a different lens. Moreover, the growing popularity of fantasy literature in recent times signifies its relevance and resonance with contemporary audiences. The success of the select novels demonstrates the ability of the fantasy genre to capture the imagination of readers and

provide meaningful commentary on modern life, underscoring the social relevance of the study.

The comprehensive analysis of narrative techniques and pedagogical approaches has the potential to foster critical thinking, cultural understanding, and social cohesion, reinforcing its value within the broader literary canon. The contribution of fantasy to the continuum of meaning in literature is significant and multifaceted. By embracing its narrative complexity and thematic depth, readers and researchers can appreciate its role in expanding the boundaries of literary expression and its enduring impact on readers across generations. The narrative strategies in the select novels help to preserve and transmit cultural awareness by introducing readers to Greek mythology to aid a better understanding of the myths, values, and historical contexts of another culture. Situating ancient myths in a modern setting, the select novels bridge the gap between past and present, helping to understand the cultural significance. The study helps in exploring diverse narrative techniques that promote inclusivity and appreciation for different perspectives, which are valuable in academic and real-world contexts, different cultures, and their historical narratives.

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